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# Language shift or increased bilingualism in South Africa: evidence from census data

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## ABSTRACT

In the post-apartheid era, South Africa has adopted a language policy that gives official status to 11 languages (English, Afrikaans, and nine Bantu languages). However, English has remained the dominant language of business, public office, and education, and some research suggests that English is increasingly being spoken in domestic settings. Concerns have therefore been raised about the future of the Bantu languages of South Africa. In this study, we use Population Census data from 1996, 2001 and 2011 to investigate whether there is evidence of a language shift to English, in the sense that English is replacing a Bantu language as the home language. We show that English language prevalence among Africans increased considerably, an increase which derives particularly from the growth in English as L2. The age distribution of L2 reporting in English, however, suggests that English as L2 is often acquired through education and time spent in the labour market, rather than in the home. Moreover, second language reporting of many of the Bantu languages also increased, and consequently, the use of almost all of the official Bantu languages has also risen. The period under review therefore is associated with greater bilingualism rather than the displacement of Bantu languages by English.

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## Introduction

An important question in multilingual societies is whether the use of a dominant language threatens the maintenance of language diversity. South Africa offers a particularly interesting case study to explore this question. In the post-apartheid era, South Africa has adopted a language policy that gives official status to 11 languages, including English, Afrikaans and nine Bantu languages. However, English remains the dominant language of business and politics, and it is increasingly the language of instruction at schools.

An analysis of the Population Census data for South Africa shows that in 1996, English was reported as the main home language by less than half a per cent of Africans,<sup>1</sup> who accounted for 76% of the total population (own calculations, South African Population Census 1996). However, a number of qualitative studies in the past decade have documented the increased use of English among Africans (De Klerk 2000; De Kadt 2002; Kamwangamalu 2003; Deumert 2006); the preference for English language education among both parents and students (cf. Dalvit and De Klerk 2005; De Kadt 2005; Bangeni and Kapp 2007); and perceptions of English as an ‘empowerment device’ (Rudwick 2008, 110) and as ‘the language of upward mobility and access’ (Probyn 2009, 126). These findings are seen as markers of a language shift towards English, and there is some

concern, expressed both in academic research and in the media, that the future of the Bantu languages spoken in South Africa could be at risk.

However, the increased use of English does not have to imply language shift, in the sense that English is replacing the Bantu languages in both public and private arenas (Deumert 2010). Rather, English may be used alongside an African home language, a bilingualism that can remain stable over time and that may be the end product of linguistic contact rather than a precursor to monolingualism.

Many of the studies which investigate language shift in post-apartheid South Africa have been based on qualitative research about relatively small samples of speakers from geographically specific areas and demographically specific groups. These studies have been able to explore the complexities of language behaviour and attitudes to language use, but given their scope, they cannot describe national patterns and trends in language demographics. Quantitative micro data on the languages which people speak lack the nuances and texture of qualitative data, but they provide the means to track broad national patterns in language use and how these change over time.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the possibility of describing trends in language demographics at the national level has been limited by the nature of micro data available. Although the 1996 Population Census collected information on the two languages most often spoken at home, this information was only collected again in the 2011 Population Census, which was released publicly in 2014. The intervening census (conducted in 2001), and all the nationally representative household surveys undertaken in the post-apartheid period, asked respondents to report only on the (single) main language spoken at home.

In this paper, we use census data to describe changes in home language reporting among Africans from 1996 to 2011. We focus on the reporting of English, as both a first and a second home language, and we explore whether there is evidence of a trend in English language use, which signals a shift away from the Bantu languages. In the next section, we briefly review language policy in South Africa after the end of apartheid, and we discuss studies of language shift in this context. We then outline and evaluate the national micro data analysed in the study (collected in the 1996, 2001 and 2011 Population Censuses). We present these data in the following sections, where we describe trends in first home language reporting, bilingualism, and overall language use, and probe how reporting on English as a second home language varies by age and income class. In the final section, we summarise and review the main findings from the empirical description.

## Language shift in post-apartheid South Africa

The term 'language shift' was introduced into the field of sociolinguistics through influential work by Weinreich (1953) and Fishman (1964). Weinreich (1953, 68) defines language shift as 'the change from the habitual use of one language to that of another'. The process is typically gradual, marked with the intermediate stages of bilingualism (Fishman 1964; Lieberman 1965; Gal 1979; Mesthrie and Leap 2000). As the language shift continues, this bilingualism is expected to decline among younger generations, who become progressively monolingual in the dominant language.

The process of language shift is often analysed as the loss of a minority language in the context of immigrant communities adapting to the dominant language of their destination country (see, for example, Haugen 1953; Fishman 1966, 2004; Lieberman and Curry 1971; Portes and Schauffler 1994). In South Africa, however, the dominant language of business and public life is English (Kamwangamalu 2000; Wright 2002), which is not the mother tongue of the large majority of the indigenous South African population. The country therefore offers a particularly interesting context to explore language shift.

In the post-apartheid era, 11 languages have been granted official status in South Africa, and various language bodies and a wide range of policy initiatives have been introduced to maintain and promote the nine Bantu languages spoken by the majority African population (see Webb 2002; Mesthrie 2006; Ngcobo 2007). In 1995, the Language Plan Task Group (LANGTAG) was

initiated, which acted as an advisory group to government on matters relating to the implementation of a multilingual language policy. The Pan-South African Language Board (PanSALB) was established as an independent statutory body in 1996 and was tasked with the development and promotion of all official languages. The National Language Policy Framework (DAC 2003), approved by Cabinet in 2003, requires government structures to adopt a multilingual mode of operation and ‘strongly encourages the utilisation of the indigenous languages as official languages in order to foster and promote national unity’ (DAC 2003, 6).

South Africa has also adopted a Language-in-Education Policy which encourages the use of mother tongue instruction in schools, alongside the acquisition of English as a second language (Webb 2002; Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir 2004; Probyn 2009; Plüddemann 2010). The policy is informed by the notion of additive bilingualism, developed in theories of second language acquisition (Cummins 1979, 1980), that learners need a certain level of language proficiency in their mother tongue before they acquire, and learn in, a second language.

The policy has been relatively successful in increasing mother tongue instruction in the Foundation Phase of education (up to the completion of Grade 3). Among Africans, the percentage of learners in the Foundation Phase whose language of learning and teaching (LoLT) was the same as their (first) home language, increased from 51% in 1998 to 76% in 2007 (DBE 2010, 18). However, almost a quarter of young African learners in 2007 were still learning in a language that was not their first home language, and from Grade 4 onwards, the LoLT among the majority of learners was English.

These figures are tempered in part by the sizeable share of schools that are English parallel medium schools: in 2007, almost 17% of all schools in South Africa were English/isiXhosa parallel medium schools, and 14% were English/isiZulu schools (DBE 2010, 25). However, the implementation of home language instruction, even if only during the Foundation Phase, has been complicated by a number of factors. First, learners at school do not all speak the same first home language – given the number of languages spoken in South Africa, there can be considerable language diversity particularly within schools in certain urban areas. Second, numerous studies document the preference among African school learners and their parents for English language education (cf. De Klerk 2000; Webb 2002; Probyn 2009). The power to determine the LoLT at schools rests with the School Governing Bodies, which represent the interests of parents, and even for the early schooling grades, parents opt for English as the LoLT, rather than the home language spoken by the majority of students at the school. The principal of a rural school, who was interviewed by the National Education and Evaluation Development Unit in 2012, explained the rationale for using English as the LoLT as follows:

Because our children live in the rural area and are very disadvantaged, we decided to use English as LoLT, to expose them to the modern world, so they can understand what is happening on TV. It is difficult, but we are doing it at our own pace and parents are very happy about it. (NEEDU 2013, 33)

A preference for English as LoLT has also been documented for the tertiary sector. Studies such as Dalvit and De Klerk (2005), De Kadt (2005) and Bangeni and Kapp (2007) find that African students see English as the language that prepares students for their future and promises access to resources and upward mobility. For this reason, the majority of respondents in these studies express positive attitudes towards English as the dominant medium of instruction at university level.

Some research also identifies the increased use of English not only in the public domains of education and the labour market, but also in the domestic context and among social peers (cf. De Klerk 2000; De Kadt 2002; Rudwick 2008). For example, De Klerk (2000) examines the language behaviour of isiXhosa-speaking parents whose children attend English-medium schools in Grahamstown (Eastern Cape). Her study finds that the majority of the parents in her sample use English when communicating with their child (either exclusively, or alongside isiXhosa), and many of these parents report a ‘steady increase in the use of English at home’ (De Klerk 2000, 93). De Kadt (2002) documents the self-reported use of English by students from two English-medium schools

in KwaZulu-Natal and observes that students from both the urban and the rural school 'report English as increasingly being claimed in their home communities, including in the home itself' (De Kadt 2002, 86).

These findings have been interpreted as evidence of a shift to English that threatens the survival of the Bantu languages of South Africa. As discussed in Mesthrie (2008) and Deumert (2010), this view is particularly pervasive in the popular media and the press, but it is also expressed in the academic literature. Kamwangamalu (2003, 237), for example, writes that 'English is spreading like the mynah bird, and ... the domains in which the other official languages are used are shrinking rapidly'. De Klerk (2000, 105) interprets the results of her study as evidence that, among the children of the participants in her study, the 'shift to English is well under way, and is almost irrevocable'. The key impetus for this shift is argued to be the socio-economic value of English, which is widely regarded as the language of upward mobility and as offering 'the greatest financial and political rewards' (De Klerk 2000, 89).

However, as Deumert (2010) notes, this research does not provide conclusive evidence that Bantu languages are being replaced by English as the home language, and therefore that a language shift is occurring. Rather, what is documented is 'a widening of linguistic repertoires in the home, with peers and at school/work; that is English is being used *in addition to* other languages' (Deumert 2010, 17; original emphasis). This bilingualism may persist over time if Bantu languages retain their cultural capital and remain what House (2003) calls 'languages for identification'.

Some research suggests that this is indeed the case. Rudwick's (2008) study of language behaviour in an African township in KwaZulu-Natal, for example, finds both the increased use of English and 'a strong commitment of isiZulu-speakers to their mother tongue' (Rudwick 2008, 101). Notwithstanding widespread recognition of the instrumental value of English, the large majority of respondents in her study retained isiZulu as their first home language, because the 'use of another language, in this case English, in a domestic setting would undermine the home culture' (Rudwick 2008, 112). Similarly, Dyers's (2008) research on the language choices and attitudes of isiXhosa- and Afrikaans-speaking pupils from a dual medium (Afrikaans and English) high school in a Western Cape Township reveals that the exclusive use of English was rarely attested amongst these pupils, except at school. Rather, pupils use their mother tongue, or a mixture of mother tongue and English, for communication in social and domestic domains. Even though English 'had the highest instrumental value, ... loyalty to the individual mother-tongues still remained' (Dyers 2008, 119). This loyalty to the home language is also noted in the studies cited earlier, which report African students' preference for English as LoLT at South African universities. Despite this preference, the students also 'emphasised the symbolic significance of their home language' as a marker of their identity (Bangeni and Kapp 2007, 7). In contrast, English, despite its dominant role in education, 'is not the language of their cultural heritage and of intense personal feelings' (Dalvit and De Klerk 2005, 6). In keeping with these findings, Mesthrie (2008, 47) concludes that the Bantu languages of South Africa 'are likely to remain an integral part of the home and community and in some public domains for some time to come'.

Most studies of language shift in the post-apartheid period are based on qualitative research in specific communities, and on relatively small samples (drawn from relatively more affluent groups) of Africans. While this research can examine the reasons for, and the parameters of, people's language choices and shed light on individual or social aspects of language behaviour, it cannot describe national trends or investigate variation across different groups of Africans. As noted in Verdoodt (1997, 42), language censuses can 'form the basis for further social investigation of the demography of language groups', but few studies use quantitative data and methods to interrogate patterns of, and changes in, language use in South Africa. An exception is Deumert's (2010) study of language shift in Cape Town, which uses micro data collected in the 1996 and 2001 Population Censuses. However, Deumert's analysis focuses on language use in only one municipality and is limited by the nature of data that were available at the time of her study: although the 1996 Census asked respondents to report on two languages most often spoken at home, the 2001 Census and all the

nationally representative household surveys conducted in the post-apartheid period have collected information only on the (single) main language which is most often spoken in the home. Consequently, it has not been possible to explore how bilingualism among Africans has been changing over time, and whether younger generations of Africans are becoming more monolingual in English (Mesthrie 2008).

The recent public release of the 2011 Census data provides the unique opportunity to use language statistics to investigate further the question of language shift to English in South Africa. In contrast to the 2001 Census, but like the 1996 Census, the 2011 Population Census asked respondents to report on the two main languages spoken at home. Although the time period spanning the 1996 and 2011 Censuses is too short to draw conclusions about language shift, the data can inform the debate by describing how language use has changed nationally over the post-apartheid period.

## Data and methods

The data for the study come from the (10% samples of the) three Population Censuses that have been conducted in post-apartheid South Africa (in 1996, 2001, 2011). Although the census instruments are comparable in many respects, they included different questions on the languages spoken by the population.

The 2001 Census (like most of the nationally representative household surveys in South Africa) asked all respondents to identify which 'language does ... speak most often in this household?' In contrast, the 1996 and 2011 Population Censuses collected information on two home languages, although the questions asked differ. In 1996, respondents were asked about the language spoken 'most often at home'. They were then asked if more than one language was spoken, and if so, which language was spoken 'next most often'. The 2011 Census asked respondents which 'two languages does ... speak most often in this household?' The response options to this question are then ranked as 'first' and 'second' language.

The three censuses also included different response options for the language questions. In all three surveys, the 11 official languages are identified, as well as a category for 'other' languages. However, in 1996, a further 15 languages are separately identified, and in 2011, an additional response option is included for sign language. To compare the 1996 Census with those that followed, we grouped all languages other than the 11 official languages into a category of 'other' languages. The inclusion of sign language as a response option only in 2011 potentially complicates a comparison across the years, as some respondents would switch, from having reported a spoken language as their home language in the earlier censuses, to sign language in the latest census. However, this is not likely to have a significant effect, as the extent of sign language reporting in 2011 is very low.

In interpreting the census data, further qualifications should be noted. First, information on an individual's first or most common language spoken at home is typically interpreted as representing the individual's mother tongue, or L1 (see, for example, the Department of Basic Education's recent definition of 'home language' as 'the language first acquired by children through immersion at home; the language in which an individual thinks'; DBE 2013, 3). However, this may not always be the case. For example, cohabiting couples with different mother tongues may communicate primarily in the mother tongue of the one partner. (See also Webb 2002, 67 for some discussion of the problematic nature of terms like 'mother-tongue', 'first language' or 'home language' in the South African context.) Second, we identify bilinguals as 'individuals who actively use more than one language' (Kroll et al. 2015, 378), and we assume that when a second home language (L2) is reported, individuals have a basic proficiency in the language. However, we have no way of establishing how proficient individuals are in the second language they report speaking. Third, while we can be confident that a language reported as a first home language is indeed spoken in the home, the domain of use of a second language is more ambiguous. It is possible that languages identified as being spoken 'in the household' are spoken primarily outside the household, for example, in school or the labour market. We present data that support this suggestion later on in the paper. However, we recognise also

that some respondents may have reported a second language only if it was spoken literally ‘within the home’. In this case, if a second language is spoken at school or in the labour market, our measures of ‘bilingualism’ will be underestimated, and analogously, ‘monolingualism’ will be overestimated. Fourth, we recognise that particularly in urban areas where there is considerable language diversity, people may not speak the standard form of a language but a non-standard variety such as Tsotsitaal, Iscamtho or Pretoria Sotho (Calteaux 1996), or they may mix several languages or varieties, which cannot be revealed in an analysis of the census data. We are aware that by treating languages ‘as separate and enumerable categories’ (Makoni and Pennycook 2005, 138), the language classifications used in the census are idealisations that do not fully reflect the complex nature of multilingualism in South Africa. However, we believe that, despite the concerns with ‘linguistic enumerability’ articulated in work by Makoni and Pennycook (2005) and others, language statistics can make a valuable contribution to a broad-brush description of the linguistic topography of a country.

We use all three censuses to investigate changes in first or main home language reporting, and the 1996 and 2011 Censuses to describe trends in bilingualism. As we analyse the 10% samples of the census data, we use the population weights released with the census data sets to generate population estimates for South Africa. Our study focuses specifically on the home language reporting of individuals self-identified in the censuses as African. Over the 15-year period, the African population in South Africa increased by approximately 11 million individuals (own calculations, South African Population Census 1996, 2011). To describe changes in home languages reported, therefore, the analysis compares the relative shares of the languages spoken, rather than the absolute numbers of speakers.

Part of the population increase derives from the growth of African immigration into South Africa. In 1996, approximately 350 000 Africans reported that they were born outside South Africa, representing a little over 1% of all Africans resident in the country; by 2011 this had increased to almost 1.6 million individuals, accounting for 4% of all Africans (own calculations, South African Population Census 1996, 2011). In describing trends in language reporting, therefore, we also consider the possible role that this immigration may play.

## Home language and bilingualism: trends and patterns

In 1996, less than 1% of all Africans living in South Africa reported either English or Afrikaans as their first or main home language, but Afrikaans was relatively more common than English (Table 1). Over the 15-year period, these language shares increased considerably. However, the growth in English was larger than that in Afrikaans such that by 2011, a greater percentage of

**Table 1.** First home language reporting among Africans, South Africa.

	1996	2001	2011
English	0.35	0.50	2.89
Afrikaans	0.71	0.69	1.49
IsiZulu	29.60	30.16	28.55
IsiXhosa	23.19	22.24	20.03
Sepedi	11.91	11.87	11.41
Setswana	10.60	10.33	9.85
Sesotho	9.82	10.05	9.41
Tshivenda	2.83	2.88	2.97
Xitsonga	5.54	5.59	5.58
IsiNdebele	1.89	1.97	2.62
SiSwati	3.31	3.37	3.18
Other	0.25	0.34	1.49
Sign	–	–	0.52
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: South African Population Census (1996, 2001, 2011) (10% sample).

Note: The data have been weighted to represent the South African population.

Africans reported English as their first language than Afrikaans. Nonetheless, because the increases were from very low bases, both English and Afrikaans were still minority first languages among Africans in 2011, accounting for 2.9% and 1.5% of speakers, respectively.

In 2011, the three largest first home language groups among Africans remained isiZulu, isiXhosa and Sepedi, accounting for almost 60% of all Africans; and the modal (or most common) first home language remained isiZulu spoken by almost 29% of Africans. Although the absolute number of Africans reporting each of these languages as their first home language increased from 1996 to 2011, these increases were smaller than increases in a number of other languages, including not only English, but also Afrikaans, isiNdebele and 'other' languages. Consequently, the language shares of isiZulu, isiXhosa and Sepedi declined, although these changes were modest.

Part of the growth in the language share of English reported as L1 derives from increased immigration into South Africa. Among Africans identified as L1 speakers of English, the percentage born in South Africa decreased from 1996 to 2011 (from 87% to 83%). The rise in the language shares of both 'other' languages and isiNdebele is also explained partly by immigration. From 1996 to 2011, the percentage of South Africa-born Africans declined substantially among L1 speakers of 'other' languages (from 56% to 22%) and L1 speakers of isiNdebele (from 99% to 89%). (These data are not tabulated in the paper, but more comprehensive statistics for all the language groups are available upon request.)

Languages other than the official languages are typically spoken as a first home language by individuals who have moved to South Africa. In the specific case of immigrants from Zimbabwe, it is likely that many reported isiNdebele as their home language, rather than 'other' languages. However, although Zimbabwean and South African isiNdebele are mutually intelligible, the isiNdebele spoken in Zimbabwe would count as a different language from that spoken in South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

When the population is restricted to South Africa-born Africans, then the share who report English as a first home language in 2011 falls to 2.5% (from the 2.9% shown in Table 1), and the shares reporting 'other' languages and isiNdebele fall to 0.34% and 2.43%, respectively.

Underlying these national patterns and trends in language demographics is also considerable regional variation. Although English as L1 has increased among Africans in both urban and rural areas of the country, its usage is far higher in urban than rural areas, and it is higher still in the city regions. In 2011, a little over 1% of all Africans in rural areas reported English as their first home language, compared to 4.2% of Africans in urban areas. In the three major metropolitan regions of South Africa, English as L1 is most common in Cape Town (accounting for 7.6% of Africans), followed by Johannesburg (6%) and Durban (4.5%).

The higher usage of English as L1 in urban areas, and in the major metropolitan regions in particular, is not surprising, given the concentration of English-medium schools, and opportunities for employment and public office in these areas. There is also considerable immigration into both Cape Town and Johannesburg specifically, and African immigrants account for a sizeable share of African L1 English-speakers in these cities (approximately 20% in Cape Town and 33% in Johannesburg in 2011).

Of the three major cities, language shares among Africans changed the most markedly in Cape Town. City-level trends can only be identified from 2001 to 2011, as the city boundaries changed from 1996 to 2001. Over the 10-year period, the number of Africans who reported isiXhosa as their first home language increased in Cape Town by about 257 000 Africans. However, because isiXhosa is the most common language spoken by Africans in Cape Town, this increase in the number of L1 isiXhosa-speakers translated into a growth rate of only 31%. In contrast, the growth rates in a number of other languages as L1, including English, Afrikaans, and particularly 'other' languages, were from smaller bases and were far larger: the number of Africans who reported English as their first home language increased by 375% (or by 83 000 Africans); the number who reported Afrikaans increased by approximately 170% (or 40 000 Africans); and the number who reported 'other' languages grew by over 1000% (or about 58 000 individuals). Consequently, among Africans in Cape Town, the share with isiXhosa as their first home language declined, from 90% to 77% of

Africans, while the shares increased for English (from 2.5% to 7.6%), for Afrikaans (from 2.6% to 4.5%), and for 'other' languages (from 0.6% to 4.6%).

In a multilingual society, however, information only on an individual's main home language will not capture the extent of language use and language change. Trends in second home language reporting in South Africa are described in Tables 2 and 3. In 1996, the large majority of Africans reported being monolingual: 88% identified speaking only one home language and only 12% therefore reported a second language spoken at home. By 2011, the extent of monolingualism had fallen considerably to 52%, meaning that almost half (48%) of all Africans reported speaking (at least) two home languages (Table 2).

Across all the language groups, the extent of monolingualism is lower among adults specifically, indicating that children are more likely to speak only one language. The decline in monolingual reporting is also larger among African adults than among all Africans, falling from 86% in 1996 to 47% in 2011. These findings suggest that a second language is acquired partly through schooling and time spent in the labour market, a hypothesis which we explore further in the next section.

**Table 2.** Second language reporting, Africans 1996 and 2011.

First home language	1996		2011	
	No second language (%)	No second language, 15 years plus (%)	No second language (%)	No second language, 15 years plus (%)
English	38.9	36.9	45.3	40.9
Afrikaans	59.6	56.3	39.6	35.8
IsiZulu	89.8	87.6	52.5	46.5
IsiXhosa	90.5	88.2	51.6	45.8
Sepedi	91.2	89.5	61.0	55.5
Setswana	87.9	86.0	55.5	50.2
Sesotho	83.5	81.9	52.6	48.9
Tshivenda	92.0	90.0	58.0	51.6
Xitsonga	82.4	79.9	50.0	44.0
IsiNdebele	77.6	76.3	39.6	36.7
SiSwati	84.5	82.0	45.2	39.3
Other	59.2	54.2	26.4	22.1
Sign	–	–	60.1	55.9
All	88.1	85.9	52.3	46.8

Source: South African Population Census (1996, 2011) (10% sample).

Note: The data have been weighted to represent the South African population.

**Table 3.** Main second languages reported, Africans 1996 and 2011.

First home language	1996		2011	
	Main second language I (%)	Main second language II (%)	Main second language I (%)	Main second language II (%)
English	IsiZulu (20.2)	Afrikaans (12.0)	IsiZulu (12.7)	Other (10.2)
Afrikaans	English (10.7)	Setswana (10.2)	English (36.3)	Setswana (8.1)
IsiZulu	English (4.6)	Sesotho (2.3)	English (34.9)	Sesotho (3.7)
IsiXhosa	English (3.7)	Sesotho (2.0)	English (34.0)	IsiZulu (5.4)
Sepedi	IsiZulu (1.8)	English (1.7)	English (19.8)	Setswana (4.0)
Setswana	English (3.2)	Afrikaans (3.0)	English (24.8)	Afrikaans (5.5)
Sesotho	IsiZulu (5.5)	IsiXhosa (3.0)	English (17.9)	IsiZulu (10.5)
Tshivenda	IsiXhosa (1.8)	English (1.5)	English (20.5)	Xitsonga (7.1)
Xitsonga	IsiXhosa (4.8)	IsiZulu (3.9)	English (14.5)	IsiZulu (8.8)
IsiNdebele	Sepedi (8.6)	IsiZulu (6.1)	English (19.8)	IsiZulu (16.7)
SiSwati	Xitsonga (4.9)	IsiZulu (4.1)	English (24.2)	IsiZulu (9.4)
Other	English (15.8)	IsiZulu (6.9)	English (51.5)	IsiZulu (8.0)
Sign	–	–	English (21.5)	Afrikaans (5.5)
All	English (3.3)	IsiZulu (1.8)	English (27.3)	IsiZulu (4.7)

Source: South African Population Census (1996, 2011) (10% sample).

Note: The data have been weighted to represent the South African population.

**Table 4.** Combined home languages (first and second languages).

Percentage of Africans reporting a home language, as either L1 or L2	1996	2011
English	3.66	29.75
Afrikaans	1.71	3.35
isiZulu	31.19	32.73
isiXhosa	23.87	21.49
Sepedi	12.68	12.96
Setswana	11.59	12.19
Sesotho	11.36	12.29
Tshivenda	2.96	3.36
Xitsonga	6.08	7.07
isiNdebele	2.14	3.54
isiSwati	3.63	3.89
Other	0.39	2.25
Sign language	–	0.70

Source: South African Population Census (1996, 2011) (10% samples).

Note: The data have been weighted to represent the South African population. The percentages do not add up to 100 because they include both first and second language reporting.

The extent of monolingualism varies considerably by language group. In 1996, the very small group of Africans who were L1 speakers of English (accounting for 0.4% of all Africans), were the least likely to report being monolingual. By 2011, the extent of monolingualism among L1 speakers of English had increased, but it remained substantially below the national average in 2011, and below the extent of monolingualism among the three largest language groups in South Africa (isiZulu, isiXhosa and Sepedi).

The growth in second home language reporting corresponds particularly to the increased use of English, and to a lesser extent, isiZulu, as a second language (Table 3). In 1996, English was the most common second language spoken by Africans, but this was reported by only 3.3% of all Africans (while 88% reported not speaking a second language). By 2011, the share of all Africans who reported English as a second language had increased more than eightfold (to 27.3%). But given that 48% of Africans reported speaking a second language in 2011, a substantial share (a further 21%) of Africans reported a second language which was not English.

The second most common L2 reported by Africans in both 1996 and 2011 is isiZulu, the language share of which more than doubled from 1.8% of L2 languages in 1996 to 4.7% in 2011 (Table 3). Although not summarised in the table, second language reporting of a number of the other Bantu languages also increased, including Xitsonga (from 0.6% to 1.6% of all Africans), Setswana (from 1.1% to 2.5%), Sepedi (from 0.8% to 1.7%) and Sesotho (from 1.6% to 3.1%).

The increase in second home language reporting therefore represents a considerable widening of the linguistic repertoires of Africans, rather than only the rise in English as L2. This is further illustrated when we consider *overall* language use, whether the language is reported as a first or second home language (Table 4). Over the period, the share of Africans who reported English as either L1 or L2 increased dramatically, from 4% in 1996 to 30% in 2011. However, language use grew across all the official languages with the exception of isiXhosa, where the language share declined (although the absolute number of isiXhosa-speakers increased). Moreover, isiZulu remained the language most commonly spoken by Africans in 2011, with a third reporting isiZulu as either a first or a second home language.

### Bilingualism and second home language reporting

The concern with English language prevalence in South Africa is that English is not only being used as a language of communication in public domains but also in domestic settings or in the home. In the census data which we analyse, respondents are asked specifically about the main languages which

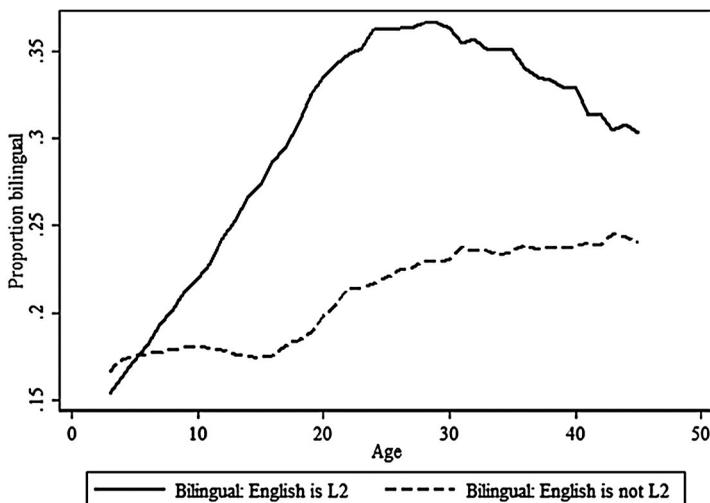
are spoken 'at home' or 'in the household'. However, it is possible that respondents did not consider the same domains when reporting on their first and second home languages. Whilst it seems likely that a first home language would indeed be spoken at home, this need not be the case with a second language, which may be spoken more at school or in the labour market. In this case, reporting on a second home language would reflect the second language that the respondent used most commonly. In this section, we probe further what it means for English to be reported as a second 'home language'.

First, we consider variation in second home language reporting within the household. We consider specifically households which comprise only two adults (and no children). If a second language is spoken in the respondent's home, then we would expect that in these two-adult households, both adults would report being either monolingual or bilingual. However, if there is variation in the household – such that one adult identifies speaking a second language and the other adult reports being monolingual – then this suggests that a second 'home' language is reported even if it is not spoken literally in the adult's home, but in other domains such as at school or the work place.

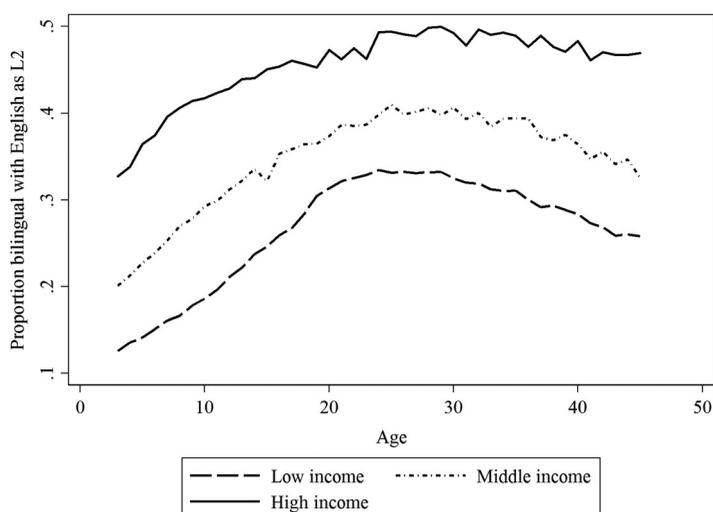
In 2011, approximately 11% of all African adults lived in two-adult households without children. Among these adults, a little over 5% lived in households where one adult reported speaking two languages at home and the other adult reported speaking only one language. In two-adult households with this variation, adults identified as bilingual were most likely to report English as their second home language: 52% of bilingual African adults who lived (only) with another monolingual adult specified English as their second language; while approximately 9% and 8% reported isiZulu and Afrikaans, respectively. The existence of intra-household variation in bilingual reporting, together with the predominance of English, suggests that second home languages may represent the second language most commonly spoken, and not only a second language spoken within the home.

Second, we explore how reported bilingualism varies by age. If parents bring their children up speaking both a first home language and English, then we would not expect to find a steep 'age cliff' in English as a second home language. However, if English is acquired particularly at school and through labour market experience, then second home language reporting in English would rise sharply in age.

Figure 1 describes second home language reporting among all Africans by age, according to whether or not English is the reported second language. The graph lines show the percentages of children, at each age, who are reported as speaking a second home language. Among very young



**Figure 1.** Bilingualism by age among Africans, 2011.  
Source: South African Population Census (2011) (10% sample).



**Figure 2.** Bilingualism with English as L2, by household earned income and age, Africans 2011.

Source: South African Population Census (2011) (10% sample).

Notes: Low income represents monthly earned income in the household of less than R3200; middle income represents household monthly earned income from R3201 to R9000; and high income represents household monthly earned income in excess of R9000. The lines represent the percentages of Africans in the respective earned income groups, who are bilingual with English as an L2.

children, bilingual rates are higher when English is not the second language. As age increases, bilingualism rates increase, but this is far more pronounced when English is the second language. Figure 1 shows a steep incline in the prevalence of English as a second home language from 15% among children aged three to over 35% among adults between 20 and 30 years.

Qualitative research has described the increased use of English among Africans living in relatively well-off households. Figure 2 shows that bilingual reporting in English among very young children is far higher in richer than in poorer households. The figure compares the percentages who report English as a second language across three groups of individuals: those who live in households where earned income<sup>3</sup> (in 2011 prices) is R3200 per month or less, accounting for more than 75% of all Africans; those who live in 'middle-income' households, where earned income is between R3200 and R9000 per month (comprising approximately 12% of Africans); and those in 'high' income households where earned income is in excess of R9000 per month (less than 12% of Africans). In high-income households, more than 30% of very young children (three years old) are reported as speaking English as a second home language, compared with approximately 10% in low-income households. This suggests that better-off children are more likely to acquire English in domestic settings, or 'at home'.

## Summary and conclusions

The census data that we have analysed in this study clearly show an increase in English language use among Africans in South Africa. This increase derives partly from the large relative growth in the reporting of English as a first home language among Africans. However, this growth has been from a very low base and in 2011, English remained a minority first language spoken by less than 3% of all Africans, and by 2.5% of South Africa-born Africans. The increase in English language prevalence therefore derives particularly from the reporting of English as a second home language.

However, it is not only the use of English as a second language that has risen between 1996 and 2011. Rather, the extent of monolingualism overall has declined dramatically, and an increasing share of Africans report speaking a second home language. As a consequence, language use of the official Bantu languages has also grown, and isiZulu remains the modal language in South Africa.

The rise in English language prevalence, therefore, has not been associated with the declining prevalence of Bantu languages in the country.

The large increase in the use of English as a second language is to be expected, given that English remains the dominant language of business, public office and education in South Africa. However, the concern with the growth in English language use is that English is increasingly being spoken not only in public domains but also in the private arena of the home. According to the census data analysed here, the percentage of Africans who reported English as the second language used most often 'in the household' increased from 3% in 1996 to 27% in 2011. However, our analysis of these data suggests that second languages may not be acquired or even spoken in the home; rather they may be languages that are acquired and commonly used at school or in employment. This is attested first by the existence of intra-household variation in bilingual reporting in households which comprise only two adults (and no children). Second, the age distribution of second language reporting in English suggests that the acquisition of English occurs partly at home but particularly through education and time spent in the labour market. Rates of bilingualism with English as a second language increase sharply with age, from 15% among very young children to over 35% among adults in their mid-20s. Rates among very young children are far higher in relatively more affluent households, which would be consistent with case-study research that documents the use of English in domestic contexts among 'middle-class' African households (De Klerk 2000). But even in these richer households, there is a clear increase in bilingualism rates by age, and these rates are then sustained through adulthood, indicating that English is acquired not only at home, but also in other domains.

With only cross-sectional data and two data points (1996 and 2011) available, we cannot establish whether the increased bilingualism in English and a Bantu language will be stable over time, or whether future generations of Africans, born to bilingual parents, will become increasingly monolingual in English. However, our findings echo those reported by Lieberman (1965), who analysed census data documenting the use of English and French by Montreal's population. Lieberman (1965) identified that 'much of the bilingualism in Canada does not occur in the very early ages or as a result of informal social contacts' (Lieberman 1965, 25), but rather that 'the main supports of bilingualism are school and (the) occupational system' (Lieberman 1965, 23). This informs his conclusion that rather than being an intermediate step towards monolingualism, the bilingualism in Montreal is stable. The findings from several qualitative studies in South Africa, that the Bantu languages remain languages of identification and retain their cultural capital even where the instrumental value of English is recognised, would also point to the future stability of bilingualism in the country.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Notes

1. In this paper, we use the race categories that are given in the census questionnaires. In completing the questionnaire, individuals self-identify their group. 'Africans' refers to black Africans, 'Coloureds' to people of mixed descent, 'Indians' to people of Indian descent, and 'Whites' to Caucasians.
2. Zimbabwean and South African isiNdebele both belong to the Nguni group of Southern Bantu languages and are mutually intelligible. However, Zimbabwean isiNdebele belongs to the so-called Zunda subgroup of Nguni and is close to isiZulu and isiXhosa, whereas Southern Ndebele shows linguistic influences from the Sotho-Tswana languages and is classified as belonging to the Thekela subgroup (Wilkes 2001; Herbert and Bailey 2002; Mashiyane 2002).

3. We use income information only for the employed because although income should have been reported as an individual measure, in many households, the same income categories are assigned across children and adults.

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